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I·M3 Institute of Materials, Minerals & Mining

Interdisciplinary Science Reviews
2024, Vol. 49(3-4) 349–362
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DOI: 10.1177/03080188241255551
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Performing rock art: Contemporary resonances of shamanism

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Abstract

At the end of the twentieth century, after the discovery of the Chauvet cave, Jean Clottes and David Lewis-Williams, drawing on the latter's ethnographic fieldwork and neuroscientific study of trance states, jointly propounded a new shamanistic interpretation of Palaeolithic cave art. This approach, which belongs to a tradition of magical-religious exegesis of such art, stirred a heated controversy, which cast it as heterodox. Nevertheless, the shamanistic interpretation resonates with our contemporary culture. First, this approach helps to recast Palaeolithic art in the contemporary context and eventually helps elaborate a heterodox version of art history where contemporary and Palaeolithic art practices meet. Furthermore, the cultural reception and representation of this interpretation as heterodox reveals the impact of contemporary culture, media and technique on archaeology. Finally, it helps us to understand the heterodox *Weltanschauung* of Palaeolithic people. Just as the alternative worldviews of autochthonous people, it challenges our conception of the world which is essential in the context of the global ecological crisis. Ultimately, it impacts archaeological practices and merges geology and archaeology into an interdisciplinary palaeoscience.

Keywords

Palaeolithic cave art, shamanism, performance, art history, archaeology, palaeoscience, heterodoxy, ontology

Received 7 April 2024; accepted 29 April 2024

Introduction

Based on the study of contemporary autochthonous cultures, Jean Clottes and David Lewis-Williams's shamanistic hypothesis considers Palaeolithic cave art as shamanistic artefacts: the cave paintings record rituals performed to reach a trance state and communicate with supernatural beings. Scholars, such as Sophie de Beaune (1998) and María Cruz Berrocal (2011), have criticised the methodology of Clottes

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and Lewis-Williams' research and their use of ethnographic comparison. Others have also challenged their characterisation of shamanism (White 1997, 104; Hamayon 1997, 66) and the importance that they attribute to trance states (Bahn in Francfort and Hamayon 2001). The aim of this article is not to discuss the validity of this hypothesis but to stress its heterodox contributions to art history, archaeology and anthropology. While this interpretation triggered an animated debate, in which it was depicted at times as heterodox, I argue that it reveals the significance of performance for archaeology. I will start by explaining this approach and situating it in the history of Palaeolithic art studies. Then, I will show that it helps to rethink Palaeolithic cave art as performance art. It connects this art to our contemporary context and helps redefine a heterodox version of art history. More generally, such an anachronistic and heterodox resonance showcases the way that contemporary culture, media and technique impact archaeology: archaeology is a situated performance. Finally, I will argue that it helps understand Palaeolithic humans' heterodox *Weltanschauung*. This is of utmost importance in the Anthropocene, as we face a global environmental crisis which forces us to rethink our relationship with the world, and eventually bears upon archaeological practice.

The shamanistic theory of palaeolithic art: its history and its context

In 1996, the prehistorian Jean Clottes and the archaeologist and social anthropologist David Lewis-Williams propounded a new interpretation of Palaeolithic art, inspired by the latest findings in the wake of the discovery of the Chauvet cave and by the ritualistic practices of the San people, an autochthonous people from South Africa that Lewis-Williams had been studying for many years. They advanced a theory that explained the origin and the context of the realisation of Palaeolithic artefacts (mainly cave paintings), which were found at the end of the nineteenth century, primarily in caves in the South of Europe such as Altamira, Chauvet and Lascaux. Prehistoric paintings would be associated with a shamanistic worldview and corresponding rituals (Clottes and Lewis-Williams 1998, 109–110).

According to this theory, Palaeolithic humans regarded the world as stratified. The underworld of the caves, more specifically its walls, represents an access point to the supernatural world (Ibid., 99). The cave paintings are associated with rituals performed by shamans trying to communicate or transport themselves to the supernatural world in order to ask the spirits inhabiting this other world for help or to use their powers to cure, solve issues, bring fertility, improve crops or help hunting. A major component of these rituals consists of practices inducing trance states. These trance states generate visions granting access and communication with the spirits. The visions inspire the paintings. The paintings document both the visions and the rituals which trigger them. Hence, they can catalyse future re-enactments, in particular those involving profane participants.

According to this group of researchers, these trance states are brought about by various techniques such as the use of hallucinogenic substances, sensorial deprivation (absence of light, noise, or physical stimuli) and social isolation – for which caves offer a propitious environment – intense pain and overexhaustion through dance or repeated sounds such as chanting and percussion instruments (Clottes and Lewis-Williams 1998, 14). Following Lewis-Williams's neuroscientific study of trance states in the context of the San culture, they give a neurological description of trance states as consisting of three stages (Clottes and Lewis-Williams 1998, 14–17). In the first stage, when the hallucination is only partial, the subjects distinguish moving and scintillating geometrical shapes such as points, zigzags, grids, parallel lines, curves and meanders. During the second phase, the subjects rationalise their perception and transform these forms according to their emotions and state of mind, they discern objects and animals. After a moment of transition, during which the subjects see themselves crossing a tunnel or a swirl composed of the previous geometrical images evolving, the subjects enter the third

stage and have thus the impression of having reached another world; they have the impression of flying or transforming themselves sometimes into a geometrical figure and more frequently into a bird or another animal.

The shamanistic interpretation builds upon previous interpretations which were already bringing into play ethnographic knowledge (Clottes and Lewis-Williams 1998, 79). At the beginning of the twentieth century, the prominent French archaeologist Salomon Reinach (1903), drawing from ethnographic studies of North American indigenous peoples, suggested that the animals might be totemic symbols associated with magical rituals performed by hunters to favour the capture of the preys and stimulate their reproduction. Count Begouën and Abbé Breuil (1958) took up this hypothesis and developed it into the theory of sympathetic magic. According to this theory, based on summary comparisons with the documented practices of autochthonous people in various parts of the world, the paintings are an attempt at controlling the animals: either they aim at capturing and killing the animals represented – which would explain why the body of some of these animals are marked with signs similar to arrows or assegais – or at helping them proliferate. Both theories focused on the culture of hunter-gatherers, on their relationship to animality, and insisted on the ritualistic and religious dimension of these paintings.

During the 1960s, André Leroi-Gourhan, denouncing what he considered as the abuses of his predecessors, raised some epistemological caveats such as a professed defiance against overarching theories and superficial ethnological comparisons. Following Annette Laming-Emperaire's previous insights (1962), Leroi-Gourhan (1982) propounded a symbolic or 'mythographic' interpretation of Palaeolithic cave art which resonated with the structuralist intellectual atmosphere of the time. The prehistoric paintings become mythical records, symbols encapsulating a religious signification. He considered each species to be gendered and attributed a sexual meaning to the paintings as species representing different genders are paired and opposed. Hence, the major aim of the prehistorian is to systematically survey the prehistoric sites and to draw a map showing the repartition and the coupling in the cave of the painted animals according to species. This enables him to interpolate a structure of the ideal cave on which each cave would be modelled. Therefore, his work presented 'certain affinities with Lévi-Strauss' structural anthropology' (Moro Abadía and Palacio-Pérez 2015, 667) and Lévi-Strauss in turn recognised his contribution to palaeoanthropology.

The shamanistic interpretation of Palaeolithic art is situated in the wake of a series of criticisms directed at Leroi-Gourhan's methodology and theory after many new findings, most famously the discovery of the Chauvet cave in the 1990s. Critique at the time challenged both Leroi-Gourhan's evolutionistic methodology, similar in that regard to prehistorians of the past such as Breuil and Begouën, which he used to classify chronologically the various Palaeolithic painting styles, and his structuralist archetype of the ideal cave. To that extent, the shamanistic approach was heterodox at the time as it offered a new methodology and a new conception of Palaeolithic cave art. While being gradually welcomed by the public and the media, this approach elicited acerbic rebukes from some prehistorians as well as from some ethnologists, a situation the media's acknowledgement only exacerbated.

Heterodox palaeoscience as heterodox art history

The shamanistic interpretation of prehistoric art stirred a heated controversy. Specialists in anthropology and prehistoric studies published an opus of collected essays *The Concept of Shamanism: Uses and Abuses* (Francfort and Hamayon 2001) intending to definitively contradict Clottes and Lewis-Williams' theory. As exemplified in an essay by Paul G. Bahn, titled 'Save the Last Trance for Me: An Assessment of the Misuse of Shamanism in Rock Art Studies', the collection is rife with puns ridiculing the two prehistorians and their theory, while the strongest points of contention reside

in the importance both archaeologists attach to the trance states and in their characterisation of shamanic rituals.

Indeed, these specialists did not condone Clottes and Lewis-Williams's focus on the trance states – altered states of mind – and on the techniques that trigger them. They consider that it reinforces the clichéd trope of the relationship between creativity and substance use and of creativity and madness (Ludwig 1995). Roberte Hamayon derides Clottes and Lewis's version of shamanism as a by-product of the New Age in popular culture (1997, 66). She faults Clottes and Lewis-Williams's version of shamanism for being influenced by the mainstream conception of neo-shamanism, as an experience of altered states of consciousness, which started on the West Coast of the United States at the end of the 1960s.

What the reaction of the previous prehistorians and anthropologists reveals is a refusal to understand and take seriously trance states. In their eyes, Clottes and Lewis-Williams's depiction of Palaeolithic art as the result of hallucinations derives from the interest of 1960s' subcultures in drugs and spirituality. Palaeolithic art had long been considered the origin of modern art, the first artistic achievement, and a sign of the emergence of humankind. These scholars display a reluctance to associate this testimony of the evolution of archaic humans towards *Homo sapiens sapiens*, art, as the ability to represent, conceptualise, and finally withdraw from and overcome the world of necessity and work (Bataille 1980, 35), with the irrational. Humans have been traditionally defined as animals of reason, from Aristotle to Descartes. This view is still predominant in modern philosophy and science and the reduplicated qualificative *sapiens* only reinforces it. Clottes prefers the expression *homo spiritualis* to describe our species. Thus, emphasizing religion and trance states as foundational for Palaeolithic cave art, which manifests the emergence of *Homo sapiens sapiens*, tends to equate intelligence and irrationality and to portray humans as animals of unreason. Nevertheless, the definition of human beings through their power to imagine, represent and create art brings about such a prospect. This aporia – art itself – inhabits the very foundation of art history, but more generally the hermeneutic tradition, and archaeology can only inherit it.

This irreconcilable definition of art, as an embodied, organised and ritualistic practice with an impulse toward another world, going beyond the rational, both rational and irrational, is central to the shamanistic interpretation. While it sheds new light on the cultural and technical context of Palaeolithic cave art, it nuances and resituates this art's relationship to Western modern art. By doing so, it reveals the complexity of such art and gives rise to a more nuanced vision of art history fully integrating the artistic experimentations of the last century.

At the end of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth century, after the first major findings of Palaeolithic sites, prehistorians, just as much as their contemporaries, used Western modern art as a touchstone to understand Palaeolithic cave art. Initially, the first findings of Palaeolithic art, in particular parietal paintings on sites such as Altamira, stirred controversies. For a long time, the most prominent prehistorians of the time, Gabriel de Mortillet and Emile Cartailhac, rejected the authenticity of these paintings, both wary, in an era ripe with such scandals, that they could be forgeries or hoaxes initiated by the Catholic Church trying to discredit them. They believed that these paintings were not congruent with the intellectual, technical and artistic developmental stages of prehistoric humans, hence they must have been forgeries. The later recognition of these sites led to a rethinking of Palaeolithic art and cultures.

At first, late nineteenth-century prehistorians, such as Mortillet and Cartailhac, and later Édouard Piette in a more systematic fashion, upheld a conception of 'prehistoric art for prehistoric art's sake', (Fritz et al. 2017, 520) in line with the *fin-de-siècle*'s artistic atmosphere. At the end of the nineteenth century, despite the lasting impact of naturalism (literary and artistic realism), the conception of art for art's sake formulated by Théophile Gaultier was prevalent amongst poets and artists: they

considered the sphere of art disconnected from the rest of society and focused on aesthetic considerations. Moreover, prehistorians thought at the time that Palaeolithic art had been realised in an area of abundance. In these comfortable living conditions, having enough food without needing to constantly fight for their subsistence, prehistoric humans could afford the extra time necessary to decorate tools and paint the walls of the caves, believed to be their habitations. Palaeolithic art would merely be a pastime for the hunter-gatherers depicted as 'noble savages' (Clottes 2016, 8). A rudimentary precursor of art for art's sake, it consists of a form of everyday art associated with the decorative arts conformable to the archaeologists' misconceptions about the developmental stage of Palaeolithic humans and cultures. Prehistorians strongly defended this position as it implied that this art did not stem from religious considerations and they were keen on demonstrating that religiosity was not an intrinsically human quality displayed by prehistoric men from the onset. As a matter of fact, prehistorians had to fight fierce opposition from the conservative aisle of the Catholic Church, which considered their findings as in defiance of the Holy Scripture, in particular Genesis and the creation of man, just like Darwin's evolutionary theories and contemporary discoveries in geology, astronomy and biology. But prehistoric studies also happen to be defined in an area of controversy regarding the separation of church and state, in particular in modern France, and some of the first prehistorians who exerted a major influence on the discipline globally were involved politically, sometimes being politicians themselves, staunchly opposing to the influence of the church and supporting laicity.

As Oscar Moro Abadía, Manuel R. González Morales and Eduardo Palacio Pérez have argued in '"Naturalism" and the interpretation of cave art', at the turn of the century, things started to change with the recognition by the scientific community of Palaeolithic art (2012, 223–224), most notably parietal paintings found on Palaeolithic sites such as Altamira. One of the striking features of these paintings was their realism. Hence, the realistic representation of nature, naturalism, became a dominant paradigm in the study of prehistoric art, which it arguably holds still to this day, as the criterion for judging and classifying prehistoric art (Moro Abadía et al. 2012, 235–236). From then on, interpretations relied on an evolutionistic conception of art leading toward naturalism as the achievement of Palaeolithic art. This conception is congruent with the predominant versions of art history developed in the twentieth century (such as those of Heinrich Wölfflin, Erwin Panofsky, Ernst Gombrich and even Clement Greenberg) (Moro Abadía et al. 2012, 223).

Simultaneously, as Palacio Pérez has shown, there was a crucial epistemic shift in prehistoric studies at the turn of the twentieth century. Around that time, several art historians, borrowing both from anthropological and ethnographical findings and theories, generalised the concept of art to include the arts and cultures of people from the non-Western world, characterised at the time as 'primitive':

> The autotelic perspective presupposing that all artistic works are a beginning and an end in themselves was abandoned. In contrast with this approach, the new Aesthetics saw art as a human production intimately related with other facets of social and individual life, and positioned itself beyond a mere speculative science of beauty. (Palacio Pérez 2010, 8)

More specifically, the new category of 'primitive art' 'made it possible to reconcile the concepts of "creativity" and "functionality". This new paradigm finally concluded that magic–religious beliefs lay at the basis of the origins of art' (Palacio Pérez 2010, 10), a conceptual framework adopted by many prehistorians, in particular Reinach and Breuil, as 'cave art would now fit within the new magic–religious definition of "primitive art"' (Palacio Pérez 2010, 10). In the 1960s, Leroi-Gouran diverged from the theory of sympathetic magic developed by Breuil and Begoüen following Reinach's insight. Instead, he turned to Laming-Emperaire's thinking and put forth a 'mythographic' interpretation of prehistoric

art shaped by Claude Lévi-Strauss's structuralist approach (Moro Abadía and Palacio-Pérez 2015). The paintings record a mythology: archaeologists cannot retrieve it, but they can partly infer its symbolism and study its structure. His interpretation nevertheless did not challenge the previously defined category of cave art and remained reliant on similar religious paradigms (Moro Abadía et al. 2012, 229).

The problem with this religious-symbolic interpretation of prehistoric art, which attributes a functionality (religious or magical) to prehistoric art, and its primitivistic conceptual background is twofold. First, given that it relied on broad and superficial ethnographic comparisons between autochthonous and Palaeolithic cultures, it reduces non-Western peoples to the state of living fossils, which was a typical position of art historians and anthropologists at the time (Chakrabarti 2020), considering them as examples or models of prehistoric humans, assimilating their cultures to the cultures of prehistoric humans, denying their own historicity while implying epistemological inferiority of their culture to Western cultures. Moreover, it displays an evolutionistic mindset, defining naturalism as the ultimate goal of prehistoric art, which is then used as the gold standard to judge the state of each local culture, site, and artefact and classify chronologically the subsequently identified variations in style.

Similar criticisms have been levelled against the shamanistic interpretation of Palaeolithic art. These criticisms are partially justified as evolutionistic biases arise at times from the comments of its proponents (Bahn in Francfort and Hamayon 2001, 85). At times, they seem to cast both prehistoric humans and autochthonous people, whose cultures archaeologists use as a reference, as primitive. However, they overlook how this interpretation has helped us to reconsider Palaeolithic art in a new light which happens to make it resonate with some technical, conceptual and stylistic aspects of contemporary art (performance, multimedia, cinema). The shamanistic hypothesis helps to go beyond Leroi-Gourhan's vision of art, the tributary of a classical vision of art inherited from Greek and Latin antiquity. This tradition commanded intellectual life at the time, given the role of the Classics in education. Indeed, Leroi-Gourhan's interpretation put forth a symbolic art associated with a forgotten and unattainable mythology. The shamanistic hypothesis questions the dichotomies symbolic/ritual, story/practice and mythology/magic structuring both the models of art history and anthropology on which the previous interpretations of Palaeolithic art rely.

Historically, the 'invention' or 'apparition' of perspective during the Renaissance represents the watershed moment in art history when modern or rather classical painting came to define itself. For a century, prehistoric art stood logically and 'historically' outside this system of representation and was considered more akin to medieval paintings, despite it depicting animals in a realistic way, as these animals are isolated, their sizes are not always proportionate and they are not integrated to a landscape. But some prehistoric engravings of herds make use of an alternative perspectivist technique, using a series of drawings at various scales and directions (Fritz et al. 2017, 443). Moreover, on a wall of the Chauvet cave, a series of related paintings of the same animals superimposed on each other or some paintings on walls with relief give the impression of movement when a torch is moved alongside (Clottes 2010, 138–139), which, according to the filmmaker Werner Herzog (20100), qualifies them as a proto-cinema. I consider these modes of representation as also belonging to perspectivist techniques, which bridge in an anachronistic fashion Palaeolithic and contemporary art practices and techniques. It unsettles a positivistic linear description of technical-artistic progress through the unfolding of alternative transversal temporal alignments that complexify any rendering of technique and art history.

The shamanistic interpretation gives clues as to why conveying movement mattered more than rendering geometrical perspective to prehistoric humans, as they were not interested in or focused on representing realistic, comprehensive, naturalistic scenes such as a complete landscape, a still life or a tableau of everyday life, but instead were focusing on one animal or a group of animals at a time and their movement. Furthermore, the shamanistic interpretation elucidates why the

animals are often represented next to cavities so as to suggest that they exit the underworld or thrust across the wall. I also think that it illuminates the absence of a frame surrounding the animals. Such framing only appears on some prehistoric paintings or carvings much later. The late apparition of the frame does not indicate a stage in the development of cognition as much as a different mindset, contrary to what some prehistorians argue (Fritz et al. 2017, 441–442). Animals are spirits crossing the walls and stepping on horizontal reliefs, they do not need to be represented on a stable ground or in a natural environment. While realistic, the paintings do not pertain to the real world. They elicit a kind of magical naturalism or what I would term supernaturalism: they stem from or roam through a supernatural world.

Finally, I think that the shamanistic interpretation also helps in part to understand the meaning of the geometrical signs that can be found on the walls or on the bodies of painted animals in Palaeolithic caves. As the editors of *Ontologies of Rock Art* (Moro Abadía and Porr 2021) have rightly warned us, it is important to interrogate the primacy of the naturalistic (representational) characterisation of Palaeolithic art which has certainly led prehistorians to overlook many artefacts covered with geometrical signs (abstract), such as the geometrical engravings realised by Neanderthal humans and consequently to deny Neanderthals any artistic ability, or to consider them merely as testimonies of un- or underdeveloped artistic skills and cultural state. Breuil, in his sympathetic magic theory, considered the signs covering the bodies of painted animals to be assegais or arrows drawn by the hunters in order to cast a spell on them and help their capture. According to Clottes and Lewis-Williams's theory (1998, 17), inspired by the description of the trance state in San culture, these arrows could designate an impression, described before the third phase of the trance, in which the shamans feel thrown into a whirlpool whose crossing leads them to the other world. Some of these signs could also be the luminous geometrical shapes, and images forming upon the retina (entoptic phenomena), happening in the first stage of the trance state and often described by participants in the studies of trance states. These signs would then not be so many magical signs as testimonies of the shaman's journey and subsequent transformation, and expressing that the animals are not real animals living in the natural world but supernatural beings. Both explanations insist on the relationship between these signs and the representation of animals on which they are superimposed. I think, given this superimposition, that this relationship is meaningful, and it is important for understanding the role played by these geometrical signs in the context of this complex art practice and to situate them in a comprehensive system of beliefs.

The shamanistic interpretation deviates from any teleological, evolutionist, or technical interpretation regarding Palaeolithic arts. It is heterodox as it unfolds a heterodox art history, in which prehistoric art does not consist in an origin for modern art anymore. It is a different kind of art which dialogues with modern art, which we can appreciate, enjoy or even partly understand. Nonetheless, it is more akin to certain practices in contemporary art such as performance art or body art, that refer themselves to traditional rituals, which they revisit, rethink and challenge, or that are staged in a ritualistic fashion. Just as much as these practices, Palaeolithic cave art is not thought of as a representational art or fine art, nor designed to be contemplated, enjoyed or shared in the same way as Western modern art. It is connected to rituals and hence intrinsically multimediatic: it consists of an embodied performance and amalgamates chanting, dance, painting, touching, engraving and sculpting. The resulting trace is an augural recording of this performance, which does not limit it to a testimony of a single past occurrence but stores its potential and assigns it to the future of reiterated performances. Similar to body art, this questioning of the limits of media and these contradictory tensions, collisions and at times fusions between past, present and future, challenge the very institution of art.

Heterodox palaeoscience in performance: the influence of contemporary culture, media and technique on the practice of archaeology

As some of its opponents demonstrated, it is easy to misrepresent the shamanistic interpretation of cave painting and to characterise it as a New Age phenomenon. They imply that it amounts to pseudo-science. Its reference to neuroscience, which is supposed to bring it the scientific credence of a newly defined, prestigious and trendy discipline, and to ground its claim to universality, is not the most convincing aspect of this theory. The study of the mind in altered states of consciousness does connect it to modern psychedelic research which in popular culture belongs to the New Age movement. Moreover, the examples of questionable, vague or inaccurate references to shamanism – more particularly of its cultural appropriation – in popular culture since the 1960s are innumerable. It is a topic of interest for various people involved in the occult and the irrational. One needs only to look into recent events, remembering for instance the storming of the Capitol in Washington on 6 January 2021, led by a character nicknamed Bison Man by the general public. A supporter of QAnon, also nicknamed Q shaman, he claims to be a shamanic practitioner and a climate activist – his ideology has been characterised as 'eco-fascism' (Milman 2021). This 'activist' was wearing war paint in red, white and blue on his face and a bison-horned fur headdress – hence the nickname – which he calls his shamanic outfit as such a headdress is traditionally worn in ceremonies and rituals of the North American autochthonous Oceti Sakowin people from the Great Plains. These rituals possess shamanistic traits: native peoples and specialists have described their religion as shamanism (Namba Walter and Fridman 2004, 315–318). Furthermore, a quick search online or in the catalogue of online bookstores will also yield an abundance of self-help guides and health books referring to shamanism in their titles or promising to initiate their readers to its secrets. Amongst the general essays category, one can even encounter gems such as *Berserkers, Cannibals & Shamans: Essays in Dissident Anthropology* (the title of which almost sounds academic), a self-published book written by an author answering to the username-like pseudonym Stone Age Herbalist. This book purports to demonstrate how 'good anthropology [a collection of troubling alleged cultural phenomena happening around the world] should disturb and frighten'. This fascination with shamanism from various kinds of subcultures inclined to conspiracy theories and supernatural forces indicates the topicality of shamanism as a cultural phenomenon for reasons which might have to do with our particular moment in history, but which can be traced back to the origin of humanity. By rejecting the shamanistic interpretation as an avatar of New Age shamanism, specialists express defiance against interferences between contemporary culture and archaeological practice.

In 2010, Werner Herzog released a documentary about the Chauvet cave. Similar to the book prefaced by Georges Bataille, this documentary grants the public access to the prehistoric site. Herzog was authorised by the French Ministry of Culture to film on site in exchange for making his documentary temporarily available online for free for pedagogical purposes. The cave is not open to the public and researchers are allowed on site only a few weeks a year when the conditions are appropriate, given the sensitivity of the paintings to the variations in atmosphere and temperature. It is thus for most people the only way to visit the site. But this time, instead of showing the origin of painting as Bataille did, Werner Herzog suggests that Chauvet was the origin of cinema. Clottes figures prominently in Werner Herzog's documentary about the Chauvet cave, which lends credit to his shamanistic theory and suggests that Herzog supports it. It belongs to an ensemble of documentaries and news articles that have welcomed this research and testify to a positive public reception of this hypothesis, which, as Paul G. Bahn rightly remarks (2001, 52), journalists mistake, at times, for a definitive demonstration. Such a favourable and uncritical media presence has certainly only fanned the flames of its adamant

repudiation by specialists in the fields of archaeology and ethnology. I think that they again elicit a certain wariness against the contemporary influence of the media on archaeology.

Herzog's documentary consists of his first foray into 3D technology after having in the past criticised its use in mainstream cinema. In the documentary, he states that the choice of the technology was imposed by the nature of his subject: the cave and its painted reliefs. Barbara Klinger considers that this movie manifests the technology's coming of age as it reflects upon 3D itself, upon ongoing contradictions faced by this technology: notably, its ability to both represent more realistically and to produce spectacle while continuing to rely on older media (2012, 43). The 3D enables the director to stage in a striking manner some characteristics of Palaeolithic cave art which have been emphasised by the shamanistic interpretation of cave painting: the importance of the site and wall, the use of reliefs, and the recreation of movement. The evolution of technique and media bears upon archaeological practice and its perception of Palaeolithic artefacts. Christopher Johnson has argued that this movie aimed at representing science in 3D: it brings to the fore 'the subjects of science, those who make science, as well as the objects of science' (2014, 915) and as such would stand for a more general meditation on the definition of humanity through technique (2014, 930). Indeed, the documentary intersperses shots of the cave with interviews of scientists and scenes which show the scientists at work, in the cave and in their laboratory, looking at 3D representations of the cave in a mise en abyme. Herzog also included reconstitutions of prehistoric human activities. One archaeologist, dressed as a Palaeolithic man, plays a flute, similar to one which has been found in a cave in Germany. Jean-Michel Geneste, who is leading the research team in the Chauvet cave after Clottes retired, tries to demonstrate how Palaeolithic humans used spear-throwers. As Herzog remarks, this demonstration is not really convincing given the shot's lacklustre nature: Palaeolithic humans would have had to be able to throw faster and stronger shots to hit fatally any prey. These performances are meant to demonstrate and understand the use and significance of two palaeolithic artefacts. They show archaeologists at work and an essential aspect of archaeological practice, to recreate artefacts and manipulate them in order to understand their creation process and their operation. Herzog's documentary depicts archaeology as a performance at times uncanny, failed and even comic. While the emergence and use of new techniques and media casts a new light on Palaeolithic art and culture, the performance of the archaeologist resuscitates prehistoric humans and their culture.

The convergence between Palaeolithic cave art and contemporary performance art brought about by the shamanistic hypothesis signals its timeliness even more so as it was co-opted by contemporary media and culture. Whereas the use by certain specialists of the epithet 'New Age', casting a cloud of heterodoxy on the shamanistic interpretation, signalled their reservation against interferences of contemporary culture over archaeological practice, I believe that, as the intervention of the filmmaker Herzog in the field of archaeology illustrates, media allows us to reimagine archaeology, while new technology alters our perception and understanding of Palaeolithic cave art. It reveals an essential aspect of archaeology in the making: its interaction with contemporary culture and media. This influence of the contemporary context needs to be reflected upon. Nevertheless, our own interests and our own context should not be repressed and should allow us to raise questions of interest for the very public of the archaeological practice: the present and the future, from now on.

Such a confrontation between Palaeolithic and contemporary cultures resonates with recent heuristic explorations of anachronism. Scholars in the fields of postcolonial, queer and sexuality studies (Carla Freccero, Johnatan Goldberg, and Madhavi Menon) have contested teleological conceptions of history (Traub 2013), which they attribute to modern Western conceptions of time and history, and encouraged comparisons between eras distant in time. This call for anachronism reinforces earlier inquiries of historians such as Nicole Loraux and of thinkers such as Édouard Glissant and Jacques Rancière. Just as much as the hegemony of the evolutionistic mindset should be challenged, the chronological imperative should be discarded in favour of such anachronistic encounters between Palaeolithic

and contemporary cultures as we saw earlier in the case of the relationship of Palaeolithic art to contemporary art, cinema and performance art.

Heterodox palaeoscience, heterodox Weltanschauungen*: ontologies of the past and back to the future*

Lately, specialists have identified an ontological turn in the fields of ethnography and archaeology (Moro Abadía and Porr 2021), in the wake of growing similar ontological concerns in philosophy and anthropology. The question of the plurality of existences, experiences and worlds has become central to these disciplines. In this context, methodological criticisms have arisen against the shamanistic interpretation. First, some archaeologists and ethnologists defend the notion of 'radical alterity' (Moro Abadía and Porr 2021, 21), as they consider that alterity between peoples is so radical that not only do different peoples have different cultures and different religions, but that they even live in different worlds (Blaser 2014, 52; quoted in Moro Abadía and Porr 2021, 18). Hence, they relinquish the expression of worldview altogether, as different peoples do not see the world in a different way, they live in different worlds, each world being radically different from the others. This has also led them to systematically condemn any essentialism and any universalism, in particular ethnological comparisons. As a result, several critics have denounced shamanism as an overarching category used in a universalistic evolutionistic axiologically biased frame. Such an excessively broad characterisation of religious and cultural practices tends to assimilate people from various cultures particularly distant in space and time while 'the usual implication that modern Westerners no longer are (believers/practitioners of shamanism)' (Severin Fowles and Benjamin Alberti in Moro Abadía and Porr 2021, 2) reduces them to an other, an origin or a primeval version of Western culture. Finally, these specialists have also challenged the notion of 'psychic unity' derived from Franz Boas's antiracist anthropological work (Ibid., 1). They consider that different peoples have different minds – that not only their mind, their unconscious, but even their brain work differently, which again casts suspicion on Lewis-Williams's recourse to neuroscience to identify and describe trance states.

I think that such criticism goes too far as it overlooks the operative nature of the term shamanism and how the shamanistic interpretation prefigured the ontological turn. With David Whitley, I would also like to ask: 'Why were many archaeological theorists incapable of seeing how this earlier research had foreshadowed their own?' (Moro Abadía and Porr 2021, 67). Indeed, as he emphasises, 'research on shamanism requires acknowledging an ontological view distinct from the Western Enlightenment' (Moro Abadía and Porr 2021, 68). As he suggests, 'many ethnographically relevant statements about rock art can only be recognised as such when the ontological differences between the Western and the indigenous worldviews are themselves understood' (Moro Abadía and Porr 2021, 69). As illustrated by the work of Clottes and Lewis-Williams, it is essential to draw cues from ethnography in order to envision the ontological difference in Palaeolithic humans' worldview. In that regard, Lewis-Williams and Clottes's interpretation goes beyond the anecdotal level of the first formal and therefore superficial references to shamanism, in prehistoric studies, by providing a general context for Palaeolithic art, a shamanistic religion, and its associated worldview. It elucidates many enigmas which stood until then unresolved, in particular regarding the Palaeolithic artefacts' location and their relationship to their support (the wall), their environment, the landscape and the world and helps fathom palaeolithic humanity's alternative worldview.

Indeed, prehistorians could not explain the location of cave paintings. Mainly, they did not understand why the paintings were underground, always in areas with no natural light, often in the parts of the caves that are far from being the most suitable to drawing given their relief and position as

they are often the most difficult to access, such as the scene of the shaft in the Lascaux cave which was drawn at the bottom of a shaft. The shamanistic interpretation provides some convincing explanations of this enigma.

Clottes and Lewis-Williams coined two concepts to characterise Palaeolithic cultures which elucidates the mystery of Palaeolithic paintings' location. They inferred these two concepts from their shamanistic hypothesis through a comparison to contemporary autochthonous culture in North America, Africa and Australia. In this passage, extracted from an interview included in Werner Herzog's (2010) documentary about the Chauvet cave, Clottes formulates these concepts:

> Traditional people and, I think, people of the Palaeolithic had very probably two concepts which changed our vision of the world. There are the concept of *fluidity* and the concept of *permeability*. *Fluidity* means that the categories that we have, man, woman, horse, I don't know, tree, etc., can shift. A tree may speak, a man can get transformed into an animal and the other way around, given certain circumstances. The concept of *permeability* is that there are no barriers so to speak between the world where we are and the world of the spirits. A wall can talk to us, or a wall can accept us or refuse us. A shaman, for example, can send his or her spirit to the world of the supernatural or can receive the visit inside him or her of supernatural spirits [*sic*, my emphasis].

The Palaeolithic human worldview is holistic. On the one hand, the concept of fluidity challenges any category: gender, biological and even geological categories. It interconnects Palaeolithic humans to animals, their environment and the world. On the other hand, the concept of permeability derives from a stratified world vision. The caves and their walls give access to the supernatural world. One can access or communicate with the 'world of spirits' in these particular underground locations that have been tested and have been identified as passageways to the supernatural world. Some of the handprints or painted hands found on the walls of Palaeolithic caves would be the result of this process of testing and identification. The paintings memorialise or materialise visions from and travels to the other world by the shamans. They correspond to the traces left by these rituals, the memories of the hallucinations or dreams – hence the dreams hinted at in the title of Werner's documentary, *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* – performed after their return. The paintings would not only mark an auspicious location where a vision took place, but also retain the energy from this experience and favour the future attempts of shamans to communicate or travel to the supernatural world. This also explains why the paintings bear traces of touching, as they are supposed to store or communicate this power, or are superimposed on each other as they are not considered permanent art or destined to be exhibited and seen, at least by everyone, integrally and enduringly.

More generally, the situation of a Palaeolithic site and its environment are significant. Palaeolithic humans probably attributed meaning to certain geological formations, characteristics and landscapes. This is an aspect which Herzog stages dramatically in his documentary. He opens his documentary by filming vineyards with a drone. The drone then ascends and unfolds the stunning landscape surrounding the Chauvet cave. Appears Pont d'Arc, a natural arched stone bridge carved by the Ardèche river, which the cave overhangs. Herzog, through the voiceover in the documentary, evokes Wagner's operas, which connect the cave to open-air theatre in ancient Greece, making use of the landscape as a backdrop. Doing so, the filmmaker certainly projects his own strain of romanticism (Johnson 2016, 20–30) on Palaeolithic cultures, but also reveals a forgotten aspect of ancient Greek cultures, which still bears upon Western contemporary culture. As the anthropologist Joëlle Robert-Lamblin argues in a book presenting the results of the multidisciplinary research group led by Clottes which studied the Chauvet cave after its discovery: '[t]he access path to the cave, partly carved by water in the cliff, as well as the existence of the spectacular arch of Pont d'Arc, in the vicinity of the cave,

must have imparted a fascinating, even sacred, character to the overall site'. (Clottes 2010, 206) This corresponds to Clottes's point of view that he hints at in the second part of the same book (2010, 15), and develops in another book, in which he relates similar impressions elicited by the contemplation of archaeological sites in North America (Clottes 2016). The landscape becomes meaningful and participates in the rituals and the overall system of beliefs.

The ontology of Palaeolithic humans inferred from the shamanistic interpretation is heterodox for two reasons. First, like recent developments in animal and environmental studies, it challenges human exceptionalism, the separation between humanity and animals, and more generally any other life form, and anthropocentrism, the perception of the world from a solely human perspective. Second, it leads to envisaging Earth as a totality, in which the stone is not 'worldless', contrary to Heidegger's famous disclaimer (1996, 177), but just as does the human being, 'makes world'. This aspect resonates with contemporary anthropology and philosophy inspired by autochthonous people's knowledge, such as the work of Povinelli (2016, 5), laying bare our unconscious geontology. This ontology consists of an axiological opposition of the living to the non-living, life gaining its pre-eminence through the devaluation of its other, which then turns into an extensive collection of inanimate objects always already in our possession, ready to be extracted, used, turned into productive, dispensable, and inexhaustible resources fuelling our development. The Palaeolithic heterodox worldview, just as the worldview of the Belyen aboriginal people from the Northern Territories whose culture Povinelli writes about, reverses this opposition by attributing to non-life (rock and geological formations, landscape, environment, the Earth) characteristics which are traditionally attributed to the living: power, agency and even life.

Conclusion: should we talk to/about rocks?

The shamanistic interpretation of Palaeolithic cave art is heterodox to the extent that it helps us apprehend this art in a new way as a situated and embodied performance practice. Oddly, it foreshadows contemporary performance art. While it challenges previous conceptions of art history, it exemplifies how contemporary media and culture bear upon archaeological practice. Finally, this theory gives access to the heterodox worldview of Palaeolithic humans, which leads us to rethink our own ontology: our conception of and our relationship with the world.

Nowadays, the fields of palaeoanthropology and geology are surely closely connected. To understand the establishment, evolution and structure of a prehistoric site, as well as to date and reconstruct it, it is necessary to carry out a great variety of geological analyses. But beyond that, in the Anthropocene, history has turned into geological time and led to an erasure of the disciplinary limits between anthropology, biology and geology. Geologists have indeed adopted the term Anthropocene to qualify our contemporary geological era. The Anthropocene designates the era when humankind (at least in neoliberal societies) started to drastically and lethally impact Earth at a global and irreversible scale, to the extent that it affected Earth's geology. This forces us to acknowledge not only our deadly effects on our environment, the ecological risks, and the global and massive extinctions that we are facing due to our own excesses, but more generally our responsibility toward many others: the environment, the Earth, and the many other peoples that we deprived of their land, whose lives we put at risk and to whom we are now even more indebted.

In the context of the recent rise in consciousness over the environmental crisis which we are facing, the heterodox *Weltanschauung* of prehistoric humans unearthed by the shamanistic interpretation offers an alternative to face this challenge. The geological and the non-living are an integral part of the world. It implies that scientists ask archaeological, anthropological, artistic, religious and philosophical questions to/about rock formations. This alternative worldview ultimately impacts archaeology as it blends it into

palaeoscience. It lends palaeoscience a new meaning and metamorphoses it into an innovative and interdisciplinary field that looks into the past to understand the present and presage the future.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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